Ecumenical Prayer Service

for the Promotion of Racial Justice and Reconciliation

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Subcommittee for the Promotion of Racial Justice and Reconciliation

ECUMENICAL PRAYER SERVICE FOR THE PROMOTION OF RACIAL JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
R: Amen.

OPENING HYMN

Amazing Grace! (Lead Me, Guide Me Hymnal, Second Edition, GIA Publications, INC #495)

GREETING

OPENING PRAYER

Gracious God,
Your Word reminds us: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). As we gather today—united as one people in the body of Christ— we lift our voices in prayer for healing and reconciliation in our society. In your mercy and love, hear the cries of all who call upon you. We trust in your abiding presence, ever at work in our lives. Strengthen us by your love, that we may labor faithfully for justice and peace in our land.
R: Amen.

GUIDED REFLECTION

Hear the Word of the Lord spoken through the Prophet Micah 6:8:

You have been told, O mortal, what is good,
and what the LORD requires of you:
Only to do justice and to love goodness,
and to walk humbly with your God.

Let us pause in silence, opening our hearts to the presence of God.

(**Note:** Pause for 1 minute and then allow 1 minute between sections for reflection)

Lord, you call us to love you with all our heart, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Have I truly lived this commandment? Have I loved with integrity, compassion, and courage?

Christ, you teach us to seek reconciliation and healing.
Have my words or actions wounded my brother or sister?
Have I failed to speak truth or extend mercy?

Spirit of Wisdom, you invite us to confront injustice.
Have I sought to understand the sin of racism—its roots, its legacy, and its ongoing harm?
Have I opened my eyes to the ways unequal access to opportunity denies the dignity of others?

God of Light, you reveal what is hidden.
Is there a root of racism within me—conscious or unconscious—that clouds my vision of who my neighbor is?
Have I allowed fear, bias, or silence to shape my choices?

Lord, in your mercy, transform our hearts to act justly, love goodness, and to walk humbly with our neighbors.
R: Amen.

Prayer to Address the Sin of Racism

We pray for healing to address
the persistent sin of racism
which rejects the full humanity
of some of your children,
and the gifts and talents You have given.

We pray for the grace to recognize
the dignity of every person,
for those who are seen as other,
who bear the legacy of centuries
of discrimination, fear, and violence.

We pray for a grace filled society
so all children
have access to clean water and health care.

We pray for a grace filled society
so all children
have access to quality education to develop their gifts and talents.

We pray for a grace filled society
so all children
have homes where families can live in dignity and security.

We pray for a grace filled society
so all children

can grow up without fear, without the sound of gunshots.

Lord of all, we ask you to hear and answer our prayers.
give us eyes to see how the past
has shaped the complex present,
and to perceive how we must create
a new way forward,
with a new sense of community
that embraces and celebrates
the rich diversity of all,
that helps us live out your call to reject
the sin of racism, the stain of hate,
and to seek a compassionate solidarity
supported by Your grace and Your love.

We ask this through Christ, Our Lord.
R: Amen.

(**Note:** This prayer is available on this USCCB webpage. The original version of this prayer was slightly modified for the purpose of creating this prayer service template for local adaptation.)

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Amos 5:14-15,24

Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
Then truly the LORD, the God of hosts,
will be with you as you claim.

Hate evil and love good,
and let justice prevail at the gate;
Then it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,
will have pity on the remnant of Joseph.

Rather let justice surge like waters,
and righteousness like an unfailing stream.

HYMN

O God of Every Nation (Lead Me, Guide Me Hymnal, Second Edition, GIA Publications, INC #663)

Philippians 2:6-11

Who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.
Rather he emptied himself,
taking on the form of a slave
coming in human likeness;
and found human appearance,
he humbled himself,
becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

Because of this, God greatly exalted him,
and bestowed on him the name
that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend
of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that
Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

John 13:34-35

I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.

This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

(**Note:** Pause for 2 minutes of silence before the homily and another 2 minutes after the homily)

HOMILY/REFLECTION

(**Note:** Short excerpts and quotes from Pope Francis's encyclical, *Dilexit Nos*, Dr. King's letter from Birmingham Jail, and the U.S. bishop's pastoral letter against racism, *Open Wide Our Hearts*, have been included below as appendices to supplement the readings. Organizers may choose one of the excerpts below in this section. They are welcome to use the other excerpts throughout the prayer service.)

INTERCESSIONS

For our Church, that we may celebrate and welcome the diverse faces of Christ in our community, our worship, our ministries, and our leaders, we pray to the Lord.
R: Lord, hear our prayer.

For world leaders, that they may work to end the violence perpetrated by verbal attacks, deadly weapons, and cold indifference. May our nation and countries around the world become havens of peace, we pray to the Lord.
R: Lord, hear our prayer.

For our community, that we may receive the grace to see every human being as a child of God, regardless of race, language, or culture, we pray to the Lord.
R: Lord, hear our prayer.

For parents and educators, that we may teach our children how to resolve differences non-violently and respectfully and have the courage to model it in our own behavior, we pray to the Lord.
R: Lord, hear our prayer.

For this faith community, that we may hear the call of our church leaders in *Open Wide Our Hearts* the Pastoral Letter Against Racism to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to act together to end violence and racism, we pray to the Lord.
R: Lord, hear our prayer.

For our public officials, that the Spirit of Wisdom may help them strive to work for equal education, suitable housing, and equitable employment opportunities for all, we pray to the Lord.
R: Lord, hear our prayer.

For solidarity in our global human family, that we may be open to building bridges of fraternity, integration and reconciliation with other Christian denominations and faith traditions, we pray to the Lord.
R: Lord, hear our prayer.

For those who have died, especially those who have died in the pursuit of justice, may they be welcomed into the great glory of God's love, we pray to the Lord.
R: Lord, hear our prayer.

(**Note:** This prayer is available on this USCCB webpage. The original version of this prayer was slightly modified for the purpose of creating this prayer service template for local adaptation.)

Prayer to Heal Racial Division

We thank you, O Lord,
for in your loving wisdom
you created one human family
with a diversity
that enriches our communities.

We pray to you, O Lord,
that we always recognize
each member of this human family
as being made in your image and beloved by you,
with worth and dignity.

We pray to you, O Lord,
that we may envision a way forward
to heal the racial divisions
that deny human dignity and
the bonds between all human beings.

We pray to you, O Lord
that we may affirm each person's dignity
through fair access for all
to economic opportunity, housing,
education, and employment.

We pray to you, O Lord,
that we may have eyes to see
what is possible when we reach out
beyond fear, beyond anger,
to hold the hand of our sisters, our brothers.

We thank you, O Lord,
for your call and challenge to us
that we may reveal your teachings and your love
through our actions to end racism
and to proclaim that we are all your children,
heirs to your sacred creation.

R: Amen.

(**Note:** This prayer is available on this USCCB webpage).

CLOSING HYMN

Lift Every Voice and Sing (Lead Me, Guide Me Hymnal, Second Edition, GIA Publications, INC #649)

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APPENDIX ONE – *DILEXIT NOS*

Saint John Paul II explained that by entrusting ourselves together to the heart of Christ, "over the ruins accumulated by hatred and violence, the greatly desired civilization of love, the Kingdom of the heart of Christ, can be built". This clearly requires that we "unite filial love for God and love of neighbor", and indeed this is "the true reparation asked by the heart of the Savior." In union with Christ, amid the ruins we have left in this world by our sins, we are called to build a new civilization of love. That is what it means to make reparation as the heart of Christ would have us do. Amid the devastation wrought by evil, the heart of Christ desires that we cooperate with him in restoring goodness and beauty to our world. (no. 183)

A spirit of reparation thus "leads us to hope that every wound can be healed, however deep it may be. Complete reparation may at times seem impossible, such as when goods or loved ones are definitively lost, or when certain situations have become irremediable. Yet the intention to make amends, and to do so in a concrete way, is essential for the process of reconciliation and a return to peace of heart." (no. 186)

Part of this spirit of reparation is the custom of asking forgiveness from our brothers and sisters, which demonstrates great nobility amid our human weakness. Asking forgiveness is a means of healing relationships, for it "re-opens dialogue and manifests the will to re-establish the bond of fraternal charity… It touches the heart of our brother or sister, brings consolation and inspires acceptance of the forgiveness requested. Even if the irreparable cannot be completely repaired, love can always be reborn, making the hurt bearable." (no. 189)

In what we have said, it is important to note several inseparable aspects. Acts of love of neighbor, with the renunciation, self-denial, suffering and effort that they entail, can only be such when they are nourished by Christ's own love. He enables us to love as he loved, and in this way he loves and serves others through us. He humbles himself to show his love through our actions, yet even in our slightest works of mercy, his heart is glorified and displays all its grandeur. Once our hearts welcome the love of Christ in complete trust, and enable its fire to spread in our lives, we become capable of loving others as Christ did, in humility and closeness to all. In this way, Christ satisfies his thirst and gloriously spreads the flames of his ardent and gracious love in us and through us. How can we fail to see the magnificent harmony present in all this? (no. 203)

APPENDIX TWO – DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. *LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL*

I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Greco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider.

I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, so must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

APPENDIX THREE – *OPEN WIDE OUR HEARTS: THE ENDURING CALL TO LOVE – A PASTORAL LETTER AGAINST RACISM*

Holy Scripture boldly proclaims, “See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are” (1 Jn 3:1). This love “comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a ‘we’ which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is ‘all in all’(1 Cr 15:28).” (p. 3)

Racism arises when—either consciously or unconsciously—a person holds that his or her own race or ethnicity is superior, and therefore judges persons of other races or ethnicities as inferior and unworthy of equal regard. When this conviction or attitude leads individuals or groups to exclude, ridicule, mistreat, or unjustly discriminate against persons on the basis of their race or ethnicity, it is sinful. Racist acts are sinful because they violate justice. They reveal a failure to acknowledge the human dignity of the persons offended, to recognize them as the neighbors Christ calls us to love (Mt 22:39). (p. 3)

Although our nation has moved forward in a number of ways against racial discrimination, we have lost ground in others. Despite significant progress in civil law with regard to racism, societal realities indicate a need for further catechesis to facilitate conversion of hearts. Too many good and faithful Catholics remain unaware of the connection between institutional racism and the continued erosion of the sanctity of life. We are not finished with the work. The evil of racism festers in part because, as a nation, there has been very limited formal acknowledgement of the harm done to so many, no moment of atonement, no national process of reconciliation and, all too often a neglect of our history. Many of our institutions still harbor, and too many of our laws still sanction, practices that deny justice and equal access to certain groups of people. God demands more from us. We cannot, therefore, look upon the progress against racism in recent decades and conclude that our current situation meets the standard of justice. In fact, God demands what is right and just. (pp. 9-10)

When we begin to separate people in our thoughts for unjust reasons, when we start to see some people as “them” and others as “us,” we fail to love. Yet love is at the heart of the Christian life. When approached and asked what is the greatest commandment, Jesus answered: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37-39). This command of love can never be simply “live and let others be.” The command of love requires us to make room for others in our hearts. It means that we are indeed our brother’s keeper (Gn 4:9). (p. 17)

Love compels each of us to resist racism courageously. It requires us to reach out generously to the victims of this evil, to assist the conversion needed in those who still harbor racism, and to begin to change policies and structures that allow racism to persist. Overcoming racism is a demand of justice, but because Christian love transcends justice, the end of racism will mean that our community will bear fruit beyond simply the fair treatment of all. After all, "Within [the human] family," as St. John Paul II said, "each people preserves and expresses its own identity and enriches others with its gifts of culture." (pp. 18-19)

To work at ending racism, we need to engage the world and encounter others—to see, maybe for the first time, those who are on the peripheries of our own limited view. Knowing that the Lord has taken the divine initiative by loving us first, we can boldly go forward, reaching out to others. We must invite into dialogue those we ordinarily would not seek out. We must work to form relationships with those we might regularly try to avoid. This demands that we go beyond ourselves, opening our minds and hearts to value and respect the experiences of those who have been harmed by the evil of racism. Love also requires us to invite a change of heart in those who may be dismissive of other's experiences or whose hearts may be hardened by prejudice or racism. Only by forging authentic relationships can we truly see each other as Christ sees us. Love should then move us to take what we learn from our encounters and examine where society continues to fail our brothers and sisters, or where it perpetuates inequity, and seek to address those problems. (p. 23)

Certainly, we cannot accomplish this task alone. We call on everyone, especially all Christians and those of other faith traditions, to help repair the breach caused by racism, which damages the human family. Ecumenical and interreligious cooperation has been pivotal at key moments in our history, for instance, in the abolition of slavery and during the civil rights era. The leadership of the civil rights movement, especially that of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., invited ecumenical and interreligious cooperation, as was seen when Catholics, Protestants, and Jews marched together. That spirit is integral to the fight today, and in some communities, the success of this effort will very much depend on this kind of collaboration. As religious leaders, we must continue this tradition. (pp. 28-29)